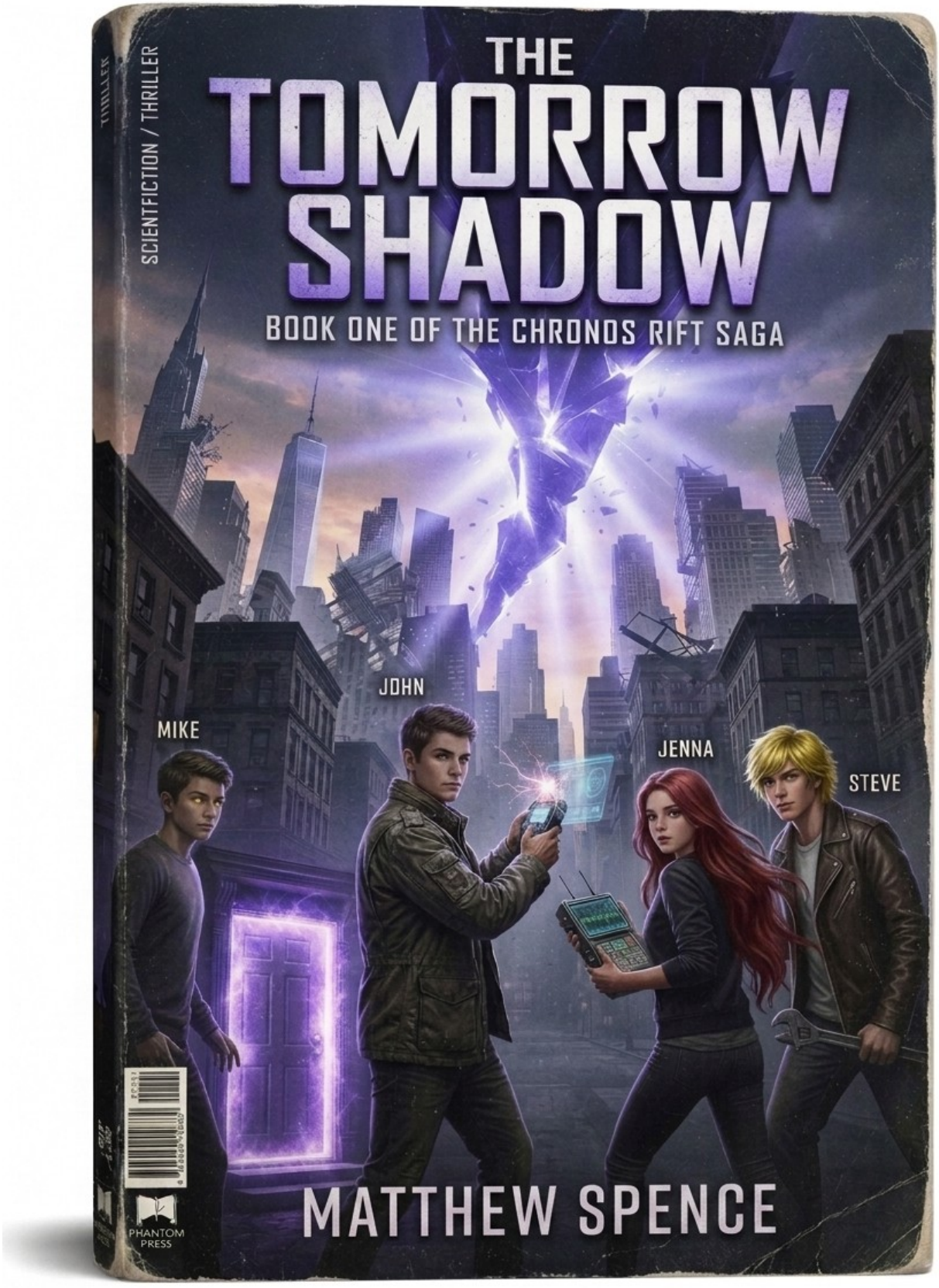
THE
TOMORROW SHADOW
BOOK ONE OF THE CHRONOS RIFT SAGA
SCIENTFICTION / THRILLER
THRILLER
MIKE
JOHN
JENNA
STEVE
MATTHEW SPENCE
PHANTOM PRESS

Tomorrow’s Shadow I

By

Matthew Spence

Chapter One

The digital clock on Steve’s nightstand blinked 3:14 AM before the numbers melted, spun backward, and settled into a glowing, impossible 26:72.

Steve sighed, throwing off his blankets. The air in the apartment had gone thick and heavy, smelling faintly of ozone and wet graveyard dirt. Time was slipping again, and when time slipped in New York, the things that lived in the margins always found a way through.

He walked into the living room, where John was already awake. John sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a protective circle of crushed salt and copper shavings. A heavy, leather-bound journal rested on his knees, its pages filled with frantic handwritten timelines and sketches of anatomy that didn't belong to any known animal. Between his fingers, John flipped a silver coin—a 1921 Morgan dollar that currently showed the face of a Roman emperor.

"It's a Class Three tear," John said without looking up. He caught the coin, pressing it flat against his palm. "The localized anchor point is right in our kitchen. We have about ten minutes before the paradox solidifies and draws company."

"Fabulous," Steve said, grabbing a silver-plated crowbar from the umbrella stand by the door. "I was hoping for an early morning workout. What are we expecting? More Victorian poltergeists?"

"Worse." John stood up, brushing salt from his jeans. He pointed toward the kitchen archway, where the shadows were beginning to detach themselves from the wall. "The chronological displacement is

pulling from the Devonian period, but the entity riding the wave is definitely infernal. A temporal scavenger. It feeds on the years we haven't lived yet."

As if on cue, the temperature in the room plummeted. The linoleum floor in the kitchen began to translucent, revealing a roiling, dark ocean beneath it that existed millions of years ago. From the center of the stove, a pair of elongated, skeletal hands made of pure obsidian smoke began to pry open the fabric of the room.

Steve took a low stance, gripping the crowbar. "If it eats my future, does that mean I don't have to pay my rent on Tuesday?"

"It means you won't exist to remember the apartment," John replied, pulling a chalk vial from his pocket and quickly drawing a binding rune across the threshold. "Keep it occupied. I need to recalibrate the pocket watch or we're both going to become prehistoric fish food."

The creature shrieked, a sound like tearing metal that echoed through three different centuries at once. It lunged forward, its smoky form solidifying into jagged scales and multiple rows of glowing, amber eyes. Steve stepped into the kitchen to meet it.

Chapter Two

The binding rune on the kitchen threshold flared neon blue as Steve jammed the silver crowbar directly into the creature’s central mass. Cosmic static shocked up his arms, but his unique temporal anchoring kept his molecules locked in place. Unlike normal humans, Steve was a "Fixed Point"—immune to time alterations and physically heavy enough to anchor leaking realities.

John swung his heavy brass pocket watch like a pendulum, his Chronomancer sight tracking the glowing golden threads of the timeline. He spotted the anomaly, twisted the watch stem backward exactly three clicks, and slammed the casing shut. With a deafening pop, the Devonian ocean vanished, the kitchen floor solidified, and the smoky beast dissolved into a puddle of harmless, stagnant water.

"Clean up in aisle four," Steve muttered, leaning on his crowbar and shaking the numbness from his wrists.

"Don't get comfortable," John said, his eyes scanning the silver coin in his hand. The Roman emperor's face had changed into a modern engraving of a high-rise building. "That wasn't a random tear. It was a targeted extraction. Someone is deliberately unraveling the year 2026 to let the Old Ones back in."

The apartment buzzer cut through the sudden silence. Steve checked the modified digital clock, which now read a stable 3:28 AM. He pulled the door open to find Jennifer and Mike standing in the hallway, both looking disheveled and carrying heavy tactical duffel bags.

Jennifer, a brilliant astrophysicist who had weaponized paradox theory, immediately pushed past Steve to scan the room with a handheld tachyon detector. "The Chrono-Leap network just logged a massive spike in this sector. Tell me you guys didn't let another paradox anchor solidify."

"We broke it," Steve said, closing the door. "But John thinks it was intentional."

Mike stepped forward, his eyes flashing a brief, predatory gold before settling back to human hazel. As a cursed werewolf whose transformations were tied to the lunar cycle of the original timeline, Mike was uniquely sensitive to historical shifts. "He's right. The Pack felt it across the city. The ambient history is souring. The Chrono-Wraiths are gathering in the lower East Side."

"It's Malakar," John said, laying his journal flat on the table. He pointed to a recurring, jagged symbol drawn across several different centuries. "The Rogue Chronomancer. He's trying to rewrite the 1904 New York subway expansion. If he punctures the mystical ley line beneath City Hall Station back then, the supernatural underworld floods the surface world today. We lose the future entirely."

Jennifer clicked her tongue, uploading data from her detector into a sleek, modified laptop. "The math checks out. I can configure the Chrono-Leap machine to drop us into the 1904 grid, but our window is

tight. Because of the First Law of Temporal Conservation, we can't bring modern tech back without risking a reality collapse. That means no phones, no modern guns, and no safety nets."

"And the Second Law?" Steve asked, already packing vintage matchbooks and period-accurate currency into his pockets.

"If you die in the past, your timeline snaps shut like a rubber band," Mike said grimly, unzipping his bag to reveal silver-plated daggers and brass knuckles. "You don't just die. Everyone who ever knew you forgets you ever existed."

John snapped his pocket watch shut and looked at the team. "Malakar is already there, building his anchor. We have exactly one jump to stop him before 1904 becomes the new present."

Jennifer pulled a heavy, glowing metallic cylinder from her bag—the Chrono-Leap core—and set it on the table. The air began to hum with a low, vibrating frequency that made everyone's teeth ache.

"Brace yourselves," Jennifer warned, typing a rapid sequence into her console. "Stepping into 1904 in three... two... one..."

Chapter Three

The gas lamps of 1904 Manhattan flickered against the damp brick walls of the unfinished City Hall Station. Jennifer had calculated the drop perfectly, landing the team inside an abandoned maintenance tunnel just beneath the roaring surface of the city.

They wore the heavy wool and tweed of Turn-of-the-Century transit laborers. John adjusted his suspenders, his pocket watch ticking in sync with this era's linear time. Beside him, Steve tested the weight of a heavy iron wrench. As a Fixed Point, Steve felt the crushing weight of a century's worth of unwritten history pressing down on his chest, but his physical form remained locked and steady.

"Tachyon levels are peaking right through that vault door," Jennifer whispered, her period-accurate brass lantern casting long shadows. She checked a mechanical compass that spun wildly. "Malakar is inside the main junction. He's already drilling into the ley line."

"We have a bigger problem," Mike groaned, leaning against the damp brick. His fingers clutched his stomach, his nails lengthening into thick, dark talons.

John grabbed Mike’s wrist, checking his pulse. "The lunar displacement. The moon tonight in 1904 is a waxing gibbous, but the curse in your blood is still tuned to the full moon of 2026. Your biology is trying to exist in two moon phases at once."

"I can control it," Mike growled, his jaw shifting as his canine teeth sharpened. He forced a breath out, fighting the agonizing, fractured transformation. "Just get me to Malakar before I lose my mind."

Steve stepped up to the massive iron vault door that sealed off the underground junction. "No time for a lockpick. Stand back."

Using his immune-to-history strength, Steve slammed his heel into the iron door. The rivets sheared off with loud pops, echoing like gunshots down the tunnel, and the heavy door flew inward.

Inside the cavernous, vaulted station, the air was a swirling vortex of violet energy. A massive, crystalline drilling rig sat in the center of the tracks, boring directly into a glowing subterranean vein of gold mystical liquid. Standing at the console was Malakar, his long coat billowing in the temporal backdraft.

"You're too late, Chronomancers!" Malakar shouted over the roar of the drill. "The foundation of modern New York is built on a lie. When this vein ruptures, the old gods will claim this city before the first subway car ever runs!"

Two massive Chrono-Wraiths—glowing, faceless entities made of weaponized grandfather clock gears and black mist—detached themselves from the ceiling and swooped toward the team.

"Mike, Steve, take the Wraiths!" John yelled, pulling a flintlock pistol loaded with pulverized salt and silver shavings from his coat. "Jennifer, we need to shut down that drill before the reality collapse reaches the surface!"

Chapter Four

Mike roared, the lunar paradox finally snapping his control. His human skin split as thick, midnight-black fur erupted across his shoulders. He didn't fully transform into a wolf; instead, the conflicting timelines trapped him in a monstrous, half-shifted lycanthrope form. He lunged at the first Chrono-Wraith, his elongated claws tearing through its shifting clockwork armor, scattering ancient gears across the tracks.

Steve intercepted the second Wraith, swinging his heavy iron wrench to shatter its smoky mask. But as the entity recoiled, Malakar sneered from the drilling platform.

"I knew you'd bring your anchor, John," Malakar shouted. He pulled a lever on a secondary device—a brass projector humming with inverted tachyon particles. "But a Fixed Point is only steady if it has ground to stand on!"

A beam of unstable, localized anti-time struck Steve square in the chest. He didn't fly backward. Instead, the space directly beneath his boots began to dissolve. The 1904 stone floor turned to liquid chronological quicksand, pulling Steve down into a void where yesterday and tomorrow violently collided. Steve gasped, his limbs freezing as the trap forced his absolute mass to anchor a localized, collapsing pocket of dead centuries. He was pinned by the sheer weight of time itself.

"Steve!" Jennifer screamed.

She dodged a stray blast of energy, scrambling underneath the roaring drilling rig. She didn't have her modern diagnostic laptop, but her brilliant mind quickly decoded the machine's mechanical logic. Malakar was using a series of heavy obsidian flywheels to regulate the drill's temporal frequency.

Jennifer unhooked her brass lantern and smashed it against the primary gear assembly. Kerosene ignited, but she didn't stop there. She pulled the heavy steel corset stays from her period disguise and jammed them directly into the spinning governor valves.

The brass gears shrieked, binding violently. The drill's violet energy vortex stuttered, reversing its suction.

"No!" Malakar yelled, his control console exploding in a shower of sparks.

The anti-time beam cutting into Steve flickered and died. Steve wrenched himself free from the closing floor, his jaw set as he locked eyes with the rogue Chronomancer.

Chapter Five

Steve sprinted across the shaking platform, ignoring the residual temporal static burning his skin. Malakar reached for a backup chronal detonator, but Steve didn't just punch him—he grabbed Malakar’s arm and channeled his own nature as a Fixed Point. Steve's absolute reality acted like a grounding rod for time. The moment he gripped Malakar, the rogue's displaced temporal energy backfired horribly, locking Malakar's personal timeline into a localized loop. With a final pop, Malakar froze mid-scream, trapped like an insect in amber inside a single, repeating second of 1904.

Behind them, Mike collapsed onto the tracks with a sickening crack of bones. The fight was over, but his body was paying the price for fighting the lunar paradox. As his half-wolf form violently snapped back into human shape, his muscles locked up and his breathing went shallow. The conflicting moon

phases had left his biology completely desynchronized from the present, causing his physical form to flicker out of focus like a bad television signal.

"The drill's feedback loop is ripping this room out of 1904 entirely!" Jennifer shouted, holding up the glowing Chrono-Leap core, which was now venting blinding white light. "If we don't jump right now, we dissolve with the station!"

John grabbed Malakar’s frozen journal from the console, while Steve scooped up the shivering, semi-transparent Mike. "Jennifer, punch us out! Anywhere but here!" John ordered.

Jennifer slammed her hand into the overloaded core. The world shattered into a kaleidoscope of roaring centuries. The safe return path to 2026 was completely blown out by the explosion. Instead of their cozy apartment, the team crashed hard onto a cold, metallic floor.

Steve blinked away his time-sickness and looked up. The sky outside the reinforced glass windows wasn't blue, and it wasn't night—it was a deep, swirling cosmic void broken only by the fiery orange rings of a massive planet. A digital terminal nearby whirred to life, its text flickering in a sleek, futuristic font: Station Calendar: October 14, 2144.

Chapter Six

Mike lay on the metallic floor of the space station, his body half-translucent and vibrating like a loose guitar string. Jennifer knelt beside him, frantically tapping into the station’s sleek digital terminal. She found a medical diagnostic database and discovered that 2144 tech could treat Mike's temporal sickness. The station equipped a localized tachyon chamber that could flood his cells with a synthetic lunar frequency, forcefully locking his biology back into a stable phase.

"The med-bay is three decks down," Jennifer said, her eyes wide as she read the terminal. "But we have a massive problem. This station isn't an astronomical research outpost. It’s a deep-space prison."

Before Steve could hoist Mike onto his shoulder, the heavy blast doors at the end of the corridor hissed open. A dozen figures stepped through, clad in polished chrome armor and wielding plasma rifles. But they weren't human. Beneath their clear helmets, their skin was pale blue, and their eyes glowed with an eerie, familiar infernal light.

"Void-Vampires," John muttered, his hand instinctively going to his empty flintlock holster. In the year 2144, supernatural creatures had survived the death of Earth by colonizing the stars, adapting their ancient curses to thrive in the vacuum of deep space. These apex predators fed on cosmic radiation and human lifeforce alike.

"Identify yourselves, temporal anomalies," the lead guard barked, raising his rifle.

From behind the ranks of the blue-skinned guards, a tall, imposing figure stepped forward. Unlike the others, he wore a tailored, high-tech military uniform, and his eyes burned with a sharp, calculating intelligence.

"Lower your weapons," the commander ordered his troops. He looked directly at John's antique pocket watch, a knowing smirk spreading across his face. "Well, well. I grew up reading historical archives about the legendary Chronomancers of the 21st century. Welcome to Sector 4, travelers. I am Director Vance, and I believe we can make a mutually beneficial deal."

Chapter Seven

Director Vance gestured toward two guards, who stepped forward to lift Mike’s flickering form onto a hover-gurney. Vance offered a dangerous deal: he would grant access to the station’s restricted med-bay

if the team used their temporal abilities to neutralize an immediate threat. A hostile faction of mutated Void-Ghouls had sabotaged the lower docking bays and was currently venting the station's atmospheric shielding.

With no other choice, John nodded, and Jennifer accompanied Mike down to the high-tech medical wing. Inside the facility, Jennifer wired the station’s tachyon generator into a sleek medical pod, initiating the synthetic lunar chamber sequence. The machine flooded Mike’s cells with artificial, hyper-dense moonlight. The stabilizing frequency worked instantly, but it had an unexpected side effect. Instead of just curing his temporal sickness, the pure, unfiltered synthetic radiation permanently supercharged his lycanthropy, giving Mike total control over an amplified, hulking hybrid form without needing a real moon.

Upstairs, the prison station shuddered violently as the Void-Ghouls breached the secondary containment grid. Red alarm lights bathed the metallic corridors in a bloody glow, and the artificial gravity began to fluctuate. Steve gripped his iron wrench, feeling the vacuum of space outside pressing against the station's fading hull.

"The atmospheric shields are at twelve percent," John shouted over the blaring sirens, tracking the structural tears with his pocket watch. "If those creatures breach this deck, the explosive decompression will blow us into the void before Mike even wakes up!"

Chapter Eight

The med-bay doors tore open with a screech of twisting metal as the supercharged Mike bounded into the corridor. Standing over seven feet tall, his fur rippling with residual silver tachyon energy, Mike now possessed the devastating strength of a full moon avatar combined with absolute human intelligence. He intercepted a pack of mutated Void-Ghouls rushing the command deck, his augmented

claws ripping through their cybernetic armor and tossing them down the depressurizing hallway like ragdolls.

Down the hall, Jennifer sprinted toward Steve and John, carrying a heavy, jury-rigged weapon she had hastily constructed from a dismantled medical scanner and a plasma rifle battery. She handed the bulky device to Steve.

"It’s a localized Tachyon-Displacement Cannon," Jennifer gasped, adjusting her torn wool skirt from 1904. "Steve, your Fixed Point status means you can handle the chronal recoil. Fire this into the breach. It will artificially rewrite the atmosphere in that sector back to a pressurized state for exactly ninety seconds."

Steve braced his feet against the vibrating floor, raised the heavy cannon, and pulled the trigger. A blinding beam of golden, stabilized time-particles blasted into the punctured hull, instantly freezing the escaping air and creating a solid, shimmering barrier of localized present-time that blocked the vacuum of space.

With the Ghouls neutralized and the hull temporarily stabilized, John checked his ticking pocket watch. The chronal radiation from the Tachyon Cannon had triggered a massive structural anomaly in the station's core.

"The feedback loop created a localized tear!" John yelled, pointing toward the main power reactor at the center of the deck. Inside the containment shield, a swirling, violet temporal vortex had ripped open, crackling with familiar 2026 energy. "That's our doorway home, but the reactor is about to blow!"

Chapter Nine

Director Vance’s boots clicked sharply against the metal grates as he and his remaining blue-skinned guards cornered the team by the reactor. Vance raised his plasma rifle, his eyes cold. "You aren't going anywhere. That vortex belongs to the station now."

Jennifer didn't hesitate. She threw a handful of overloaded battery cells directly into the station's gravity matrix console. The artificial gravity instantly reversed, pinning Vance and his armored guards to the ceiling.

"Go, go, go!" Steve shouted. Carrying Jennifer under one arm, he used his immovable Fixed Point mass to resist the flipped gravity, sprinting forward and leaping headfirst into the swirling violet vortex. John and the hulking, supercharged Mike dove in right behind him.

The roaring chaos of centuries tore at their senses before the world slammed into a hard, sudden stop.

Thump.

Steve crashed onto a familiar, soft surface—their living room sofa. John tumbled onto the rug, scattering the protective ring of crushed salt, while Mike landed with a heavy thud, his massive wolf form instantly melting back into a perfectly healthy human shape.

Steve blinked, looking around. The digital clock on the nightstand clicked steadily to 3:30 AM [DT]. The air smelled like familiar New York smog and stale coffee, not graveyard dirt or deep-space ozone. They were finally back in their own time, and their apartment was completely intact.

"We made it," Jennifer breathed, collapsing into an armchair and kicking off her ruined 1904 boots. "The timeline is stable."

John stood up, brushing salt from his jeans. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his heavy brass watch. It ticked perfectly in sync with the room. But as he went to put it away, his fingers brushed against the rogue Malakar’s journal.

John opened the leather book to the very last page, intending to study Malakar's notes. He froze.

The ink on the final page was fresh, still glistening under the apartment lights. Written in a frantic, terrifyingly familiar handwriting—John's own—were coordinates for a date three days in the future, followed by a single, chilling warning: Do not trust the anyway back. I am already waiting for you.

Chapter Ten: The Tomorrow Shadow

John stared at the fresh ink, his thumb tracing the jagged edge of his own future handwriting. The warning seemed to vibrate against his skin. Beside him, Mike stretched his arms, testing his muscles; though he was back in human form, his eyes flashed that new, permanent golden hue, a remnant of the synthetic moon chamber that still hummed in his veins.

"John?" Steve asked, setting his iron wrench on the coffee table with a heavy clatter. "You look like you just saw a Chrono-Wraith eat your childhood."

Without a word, John turned the journal around. Jennifer leaned forward from the armchair, squinting at the fresh, glistening cursive. Her jaw dropped. "That’s impossible. We just closed the loop on Malakar. The localized paradoxes should be inert."

"It's not a paradox," John said, his voice dropping to a tense whisper. "It’s a fixed trajectory. Someone—or some version of me—wrote this after we got back. It means our jump to 2144 wasn't a mistake caused by an overloaded core. It was a detour designed to change us."

Mike stepped closer, his enhanced senses catching a scent that didn't belong in the year 2026. He sniffed the air, his brow furrowing. "The apartment smells clean, but there’s a micro-current of static electricity right behind the drywall. Like a doorway is being pre-heated."

Suddenly, the digital clock on the nightstand didn't melt or spin backward. Instead, the red LED display began to count down rapidly in seconds: 60... 59... 58...

Jennifer scrambled for her tachyon detector, but her hands froze. Outside the living room window, the bustling sounds of the 2026 New York traffic completely died out. The horns, the sirens, and the hum of the city vanished, replaced by an eerie, absolute silence. When Steve pulled back the curtains, the street below was empty, but the sky above wasn't dark. A massive, crystalline rift, identical to the one Malakar had drilled in 1904, was already spider-webbing across the clouds.

"He didn't want to change the past," Steve realized, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the wrench again. "Malakar was just the distraction."

"The coordinates," John muttered, slamming the journal shut as the clock hit ten seconds. "They aren't for a place. They’re for the exact moment the universe fractures. And it's not happening in three days. It's happening right now."

The countdown reached zero, and the front door of the apartment began to glow with a blinding, violet light.